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# School Choice with Education Vouchers: An Empirical Case Study from Hong Kong

This paper seeks to question what impact education vouchers have on the process of school choice. The context examined in the paper is the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme ('Voucher Scheme') introduced in 2007 in Hong Kong. Using a Straussian grounded theory method, data collected from 40 parent interviews are coded, analysed, and developed into categories. The paper analytically situates the findings within a model, derived from the data, which is based on two properties: *orientation* and *time*. *Orientation* differentiates and emphasises the significance of choice factors in relation to the school versus the family, and *time* is related to focus on the present versus the future. The paper subsequently presents the data related to these properties and reflects on the intricate dynamic of parents' school choice decisions under the Voucher Scheme.

**Keywords:** school choice; voucher; education policy; grounded theory; critical realism; public-market

## Introduction

This paper is concerned with the introduction of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme ('the Voucher Scheme') implemented for kindergarten school children in Hong Kong and with how this scheme has intricately impacted on their parents' kindergarten choices.

International studies on school choice have produced long lists of reasons explaining why parents choose certain schools for their children: For example, Woods, Bagley, and Glatter (1998) identified three core criteria as being academic education standards, proximity to home or convenience for travel, and children's happiness at these schools. However, Witte (2000) and Denessen, Driessena, and Slegers (2005) found the most important reason for school choice to be quality of education on offer; and Taylor (2002) cited a good learning environment. A number of studies have also identified how the racial or socioeconomic profiles of schools impact on school choice (Burgess, Greaves, & Vignoles, 2009, 2011; Denessen et al., 2005; Hamilton & Guin, 2005; Kristen, 2008; Schneider & Buckley, 2002). The literature further suggests that choices parents make are potentially influenced by their own socioeconomic status, religion, and ethnicity (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1995, 1996; Burgess et al., 2009, 2011; Denessen et al., 2005; Godwin & Kemerer, 2002; Hastings, Kane,

& Staiger, 2005; McEwan, 2000; Vincent & Ball, 2006; Woods, 1996). Parents subsequently understand and engage with the school choice process or education marketplace with varying degrees of sophistication (Ball et al., 1996; Ball & Vincent, 1998; Raveaud & van Zanten, 2007; Vincent, Braun, & Ball, 2010; Wilkins, 2010a, 2010b).

In terms of school choice with vouchers, previous studies – particularly in the United States – have focussed on voucher programmes aimed at enabling children from low-income families to attend private schools (Witte, 2000) or to move students from ‘failing’ public schools to private schools (Moe, 2001), situations that are markedly different from the Hong Kong context.

All kindergartens in Hong Kong are privately owned and operated. The sources of funding include tuition fees paid by parents and investments or support from sponsoring private organisations (EDB, 2010). Private independent kindergartens are for profit, and they are generally owned and operated by private firms. Non-profit-making kindergartens are quite often sponsored by religious, charitable, and other not-for-profit community entities. With the introduction of the Voucher Scheme in the 2007/08 school year, all children aged between three and six years old and enrolled in a kindergarten became eligible to receive education vouchers subsidising their tuition fees. In other words, this was a universal voucher scheme, not targeted at children from specific family socioeconomic backgrounds or neighbourhoods

From the supply side, however, the Voucher Scheme is limited to non-profit-making kindergartens charging tuition fees up to a certain financial ceiling. In other words, some children lose eligibility for participation in the scheme if their parents choose to send them to for-profit kindergartens or to non-profit-making kindergartens charging tuition fees exceeding the tuition fee ceiling. Consequently, when parents choose schools, they are at the same time choosing whether to take up or give up their vouchers. The Voucher Scheme

segregates the pre-primary education market into two distinct segments separated by a wide gap in tuition fees effectively payable after parents redeem vouchers. In the 2010/11 school year, when our data collection began, the cost of sending a child to a voucher-eligible school ranged from no charge at all to a maximum of HK\$10,000. The median cost was about HK\$4,000. On the other hand, the non-voucher-eligible schools, with rare exceptions, charged from HK\$24,000 to as much as HK\$90,000 or more. The median tuition fee for non-voucher-eligible schools was HK\$40,800, which was almost nine times as high as that for voucher-eligible schools. Importantly, there was very little from which to choose within the HK\$10,000 to HK\$24,000 price range.

The Voucher Scheme similarly excludes kindergartens which do not adopt the local curriculum as defined by the Education Bureau (EDB, 2011; Education & Manpower Bureau, 2006). In order to redeem vouchers for their students, schools are required to observe the Government's Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum (the 'Curriculum Guide'). Besides areas of learning, learning objectives, teaching strategies, and assessment methods, the Curriculum Guide stipulates that kindergartens should use Cantonese as the medium of instruction (Curriculum Development Council, 2006). Only those kindergartens which adopt Cantonese as the medium of instruction are classified by the Education Bureau as local kindergartens and are therefore voucher eligible.

In the 2011/12 school year, 751 kindergartens (79.4%) of the 946 kindergartens in Hong Kong were participating in the Voucher Scheme, and 129,151 students (85.5%) of the 157,433 kindergarten students in Hong Kong were receiving vouchers (EDB, 2012a; EDB, 2012b, pp. 46–47).

## **Method**

The study was undertaken over three years from 2010 to 2013 and adopted a grounded theory approach, which is appropriate for developing theories to explain a process or for providing

an abstraction of actions by people (Creswell, 2007, 2008). Among the several major variants of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2005, 2006; Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998), we adopted Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998), emphasising changes, conditions, processes, actions, and explaining social phenomena through statements of relationship. As such, our paradigmatic position has important common ground with the critical realist perspective we adopted from the guiding ideas of Bhaskar (1997), Danermark, Ekstrom, Jakobsen, and Karlsson (2002), Maxwell (2012), and Sayer (2000, 2010). The key defining characteristic for critical realism is a combination of realist ontology and interpretive epistemology.

It is important to highlight the implications of our critical realist perspective on the study. In critical realism, the explanation of events and of their causation does not depend, as in positivism, on regular successions or on repeated occurrences of such events but rather on the interactions between mechanism, structure, and conditions (Sayer, 2000). Critical realism therefore brings to this grounded theory study a philosophical foundation for theorising through conceptualisation of events, mechanisms, and structures and their relations.

The study utilised a data collection process based on semi-structured and open-ended interviews. In selecting participants for interviews, the study adopted the process of theoretical sampling, a process based on 'concepts that emerged from analysis and that appear to have relevance to the evolving theory' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 202). Initially, data were collected from 10 participants in two kindergartens, with subsequent interviews from 20 parents (16 mothers and 4 fathers) who had sent their children to voucher-eligible kindergartens and 20 parents (16 mothers and 4 fathers) who had sent their children to non-voucher-eligible kindergartens. Besides interview data, documentary data relevant to the Voucher Scheme and to school choice were collected from government publications and journals.

Interview transcripts were studied line by line in order to capture their meanings in context; and comparisons were made within individual cases, as well as between cases, to discover similarities and differences. Concepts of events and actions that showed similarities to one another were grouped together in smaller numbers using more abstract explanatory concepts referred to as categories. Once categories were identified, they were developed, using questions and constant comparisons, through the discovery of their properties and dimensions. *Properties* are the characteristics or attributes of a category, and *dimensions* represent the location of a property along a continuum or range.

After concepts were identified and the more general and abstract categories were constructed, we looked for ways in which categories related to each other. We then integrated and refined the categories and their relationships by constant comparison. The purpose of developing categories in data analysis was not to use them as variables and come up with predictions but to enable us ‘to think systematically about data and to relate them’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 99). Retroductive inference, as illustrated in critical realist thinking (Danermark et al., 2002), is used in theorisation to generate plausible alternative theoretical explanations for categories and relationships developed in the study. We constantly asked the question ‘what makes a particular school choice possible?’

## **Findings**

In analysing parents’ reasons for choosing kindergartens, we discovered that these reasons tended to indicate various degrees of emphasis on educational outcomes and family considerations; and, in line with previous work by Ball (2003), different reasons had different foci on the present and the future. In this paper, consequently, in order to systematically present and analyse the reasons for kindergarten choice, we situate them in four overarching conceptual categories: *an academic experience*, *a happy childhood*, *getting by*, and *being like us*. This categorisation is based on the interaction of two properties: *orientation* and *time*. The

property of *orientation* dichotomises between those factors which may be considered primarily *school orientated* versus those which may be *family orientated*. The property of *time* locates a reason for school choice on the dimension between a *future focus* and *present focus*. To visualise these dynamics, we use the school choice approaches quadrant diagram in Figure 1. The purpose of the quadrant diagram is to position parents' reasons into four different school choice approaches. These categories are for analytical purposes and are not necessarily mutually exclusive in relation to reasons for parental choice.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

### ***An academic experience***

The upper, right-hand-side quadrant in the school choice approaches diagram (Figure 1), groups together reasons combining the *school-orientated* dimension and the *future-focussed* dimension. We name this school choice approach *an academic experience*. In contrast with other approaches, *an academic experience* represents parental reasons which can be conceived as mostly relating to children's academic attainments and futures, and it is somewhat akin to what Ball et al. (1996, p. 93) termed a 'goal-orientated/objective perspective'. The notion of *an academic experience*, however, requires no objectivity and has a more explicit demand for long-term focus than does the alternative goal-orientated/objective perspective. In fact, it is difficult to delineate how subjectively or objectively parents assess information, interpret alternatives, and make choices: There is frequent blending and inseparability. In this quadrant, we have located a number of reasons, alluded to by parents, for kindergarten choice. These reasons include *language, primary school, reputation, philosophy and pedagogy, curriculum, quality of teachers, and ethos and moral education*.

As noted previously, only those kindergartens which adopt Cantonese as the medium of instruction are classified by the Education Bureau as local kindergartens and are therefore voucher eligible. The study suggests that parents placed emphasis on autonomy in language instruction and rejected voucher-eligible schools in order to achieve this goal. The native language of all parents in this group was Cantonese, and they stressed their desire to have their children learn English and Putonghua Chinese (China's official language, not widely spoken in Hong Kong) at kindergarten.

For these parents, the need for their children to learn English and Putonghua Chinese outweighed any other consideration, including any financial benefit they might have accrued by selecting a voucher-eligible school. For this group, their children's acquisition of these languages was equated with and central to their children's futures and the world in which they would be living and ultimately working. As one parent remarked,

It is important to learn Putonghua nowadays . . . My child may have to work in mainland China when she grows up . . . Though I wish to choose voucher-eligible schools, however, I sacrifice it by picking a school which puts emphasis on language learning with Putonghua, English, and Cantonese. I have declined the offer of another school because of the medium of instruction. (Parent, non-voucher-eligible school)

Parents' ability to act on their preferences for English and Putonghua was revealed by the research to be socially situated, as low- and modest-income families were unable to afford non-voucher-eligible schools. Interestingly, the research found that, for those parents who were ethnic minorities (Filipinos and Sri Lankans), language instruction also featured in the choosing of kindergartens. But, in this case, as non-Cantonese speakers, they wanted their children to attend voucher-eligible kindergartens at which Cantonese was the medium of instruction. Once again, for this group, the focus was on a future they desired whereby their children would grow up and live in Hong Kong able to speak the predominant language.

In the same quadrant, and still looking to children's futures, the transition to primary school was seen by parents as a factor influencing kindergarten choice. This factor related to the perceived increase in competitive advantage associated with certain kindergartens – and



these could be voucher-eligible or non-voucher-eligible – in terms of their track record for getting their graduates into elite and highly ranked primary schools. As one parent commented,

I wanted my child to get into Primary School P. . . . I finally picked this school . . . Tuition fee was not my number one consideration. I concerned much more about which primary school he will go to. (Parent, voucher-eligible school)

Strongly linked to the consideration of primary schools was the notion of kindergartens' reputations: Some parents linked these to schools' track records for helping their pupils to transition into elite primary schools; other parents looked for good teaching or for an established history. Further reasons situated within the same quadrant were given by those parents who mentioned seeking a school with a specifically appealing educational philosophy and pedagogy. As one parent remarked,

There are now new education philosophies, such as stimulating children's interest to learn, not forcing them to memorise a lot. I wanted to choose a school like that. (Parent, non-voucher-eligible school)

Parents also looked for their preferred types of curricula. Examples of this would include curricula based on multi-intelligence or early training in writing Chinese characters.

More than a quarter of the parents reported that teacher quality ranked highly among their reasons for choosing particular schools. This was in turn related to the belief that higher quality teaching meant better chances of future educational success for one's child. For example, one parent said the following:

My husband liked to browse . . . about the quality of teacher . . . About 90 plus per cent of teachers in this school had early childhood education training. He said no other schools in the Northern region could achieve that. (Parent, voucher-eligible school)

Finally, in relation to academic experience, parents looked for schools with good ethos and moral education, wanting to make sure that their children would grow up with good characters and with integrity.

I think moral education and character building are more important than academic knowledge. If you have only academic results but not a good character, you may become a thief in the future. (Parent, non-voucher-eligible school)

### *A happy childhood*

The reasons grouped in the school choice approaches diagram's upper left quadrant (Figure 1) represent combinations of the *school-orientated* and *present-focussed* dimensions. Within this quadrant, the reasons for kindergarten choices are collectively referred to as *a happy childhood*. Under the *a happy childhood* category we include reasons parents cited to do with *love and care, happiness of child, freedom from unwanted academic pressure, small class size, and peer group*.

*Love and care* mostly describes how school choice relates to and affects a child's immediate welfare, which might be thought of as a more present focussed consideration. As with the findings of Vincent and Ball (2001) in the U.K., the Hong Kong kindergarten parents giving this reason were interested in more than just academic education. They also wanted someone to treat their children lovingly.

I think the school is important, but the teachers' love is even more important. This is particularly true at this early stage of growth . . . (Parent, voucher-eligible school)

Another parental reason for school choice concerned the happiness of the child. Happiness was considered to be a desirable educational outcome per se, and parents adopted simple steps to look for schools in which they believed their children would be happy.

I first checked the background of the school and then checked if the children there were happy or not. I also paid attention during each interview to whether my daughter was happy. (Parent, non-voucher-eligible school)

To ensure that their children remained happy at school, some parents purposely avoided schools that emphasised academic achievement. These parents desired freedom from unwanted academic pressure for their child. As the following parent noted,

Elite schools assign much homework and put higher pressure on kids. I want my child to grow up in an environment with less pressure . . . (Parent, non-voucher-eligible school)

As an indicator of the level of individualised attention and care their children might receive at school, other parents looked for schools with small class sizes and avoided large schools:

[I didn't send my child to that school], because . . . [t]he school was too big and gave no sense of family. I like [School B], it is smaller. (Parent, non-voucher-eligible school)

Parents also emphasised the importance of school peer groups and said that they avoided choosing schools located inside public estates – government-owned residential properties rented to low-income families. Being careful not to sound politically incorrect, these parents made sure we understood that it was not wealth or income that mattered but that some children in those schools behaved badly or came from families with 'bad' parents. The following parent's observations illustrate this:

When I went to those schools in public estates, not because I was biased, there were all kinds of parents there. Some of them were really bad. . . . If you compare the experience of visiting a playground in public estate and a playground at the Peak, you would find they are completely different. I know, because I did both. Those kids in the public estate pushed and hit other kids. On the other hand, in a playground in a better area, kids shared. (Parent, non-voucher-eligible school)

When talking about peer groups, other parents were less specific about whether the schools they wanted to avoid were located in public estates. Nevertheless, all parents who considered peer groups to be important made reference to other parents and families at schools being indicators of peer groups' desirability. Significantly, this perception of peer group desirability related to potential behavioural influences rather than to any inference that children's academic performances might suffer.

### ***Getting by***

The lower left quadrant of the school choice approaches diagram (Figure 1) we have termed *getting by*. The main difference between this approach and the *a-happy-childhood* approach is that the former focusses more on the needs of the family than on those of the child.

Nevertheless the reasons remain more present focussed and include *voucher, home-school proximity, tuition fees, campus space and hygiene, and friends and ethnic group*. Because of a focus on family considerations in the present, rather than on educational outcomes or on

longer term considerations, in the typology of Ball et al. (1995), we call this approach *getting by*.

Significantly, half of all those parents who chose voucher-eligible schools said that being able to use vouchers to select particular kindergartens constituted an important consideration in choosing schools. To make their choices, therefore, this group of parents looked at whether kindergartens were voucher eligible or not. One such example was a parent who said that

Kindergartens had been the most expensive schooling in the past. The tuition fee was a large part of family expenses. When we had the voucher, we were very happy. Of course we chose only among voucher-eligible schools. We will not choose any non-voucher-eligible school . . . (Parent, voucher-eligible school)

The financial implications of choosing voucher-eligible schools were picked up on by other parents who commented on the impact their family budget experienced due to the availability of vouchers. As the following parent expressed,

To us, it [the voucher] is very important . . . It saves more than a thousand each month and enables us to spend more money on children, family. (Parent, voucher-eligible school)

The *getting by* quadrant also qualifies *home-school proximity* as an important reason for kindergarten choice, primarily centring on geographical convenience or on family members being able to get children to school easily, avoiding the need for travelling long distances. In keeping with the findings of previous research undertaken by Woods (1996) and Hastings et al. (2005), our study found that it was parents with low and modest incomes who gave home-school proximity high priority in their reasons for kindergarten choice. Our research found no evidence of parents wishing to send their children to local kindergartens because of a desire to connect with the local community, as has been suggested elsewhere (Raveaud & van Zanten, 2007; Vincent et al., 2010; Wilkins, 2010a). As the following parent stated,

I only applied to this school. . . . I live nearby and my mother, who lives with us, takes care of my child. . . . It would be difficult for her if the school was far away. This is for pragmatic consideration. I am really busy. (Parent, voucher-eligible school)

Campus environment was presented as a reason for choice most noticeably by parents in three voucher-eligible schools. These parents tended to be relatively poor and were looking for space, hygiene, and proper air ventilation. Their choices related more to health and safety than to any education-related issues. The following parent gave such an explanation:

I chose this school because it has good air ventilation, and it is clean . . . because that means less illness for children . . . (Parent, voucher-eligible school)

Regarding *friends and ethnic group*, one specific group of parents of Filipino origin paid particular attention to whether or not their children were made to feel welcome in a school, judged in part by the assumption that if a large number of Filipino children – especially those of their friends – were already present in a school, this could be taken as a signifier that the school treated them well. As one Filipino parent observed,

They are very caring to non-Chinese [like my daughter]. (Parent, voucher-eligible school)

### ***Being like us***

The fourth approach for school choice is positioned in the lower right-hand quadrant, which represents a combination of family-orientated and future factors. We call it *being like us*, and it contains the parental reason of *cultural identity*. Vincent et al. (2010) suggested a possible explanation for some families' school choices in the following terms:

Others 'like us' are sought out in the process of choice both as a means of instrumental reassurance and as an expressive reaffirmation of social ties and social identities. (Vincent et al., 2010, p. 294)

Parental reasons which may be located in this quadrant relate to a desire for children to maintain and reproduce their family's cultural identities and to be taught in a Chinese-culture learning environment. It was more than just the Chinese language that parents bore in mind; it was the cultures and value systems of their families and communities. Parents remarked that

The culture is totally different. My family is Chinese. So, well, it is hard to adopt two cultures. . . . I am a Chinese and my husband is Chinese. I don't prefer picking an international school. (Parent, non-voucher-eligible school)

We want our child to grow up as a traditional Chinese. It will suit our family better.  
We don't want our child to go to international kindergartens. (Parent, voucher-eligible school)

In this study, cultural identity was found to be one reason why a few middle-class families who could financially afford international schools chose to send their children to local-curriculum schools or to non-local-curriculum schools strongly emphasising Chinese language and culture. This desire to maintain the family's cultural identity is notably different from the ethnicity-related choice of some ethnic-minority parents adopting the *getting by* approach described in the previous section. The key difference between these two is that the *being like us* approach focusses on the preservation of the family's Chinese cultural identity in the child's future; meanwhile the ethnicity consideration embedded in a *getting by* approach focusses on the present wellbeing of the child at school, wellbeing that comes from being accompanied by friends of the same ethnicity and from feeling welcome. Such focus on the child's future also firmly distinguishes this notion of *being like us* from Cucchiara and Horvat's (2014) description of parents choosing their children's schools to suit their own purposes of constructing liberal, open-minded city dweller identities for themselves.

### **The dynamics of school choice and the Voucher Scheme**

In the previous section, we conceptualised parents' reasons for school choices into four categories: *an academic experience*, *a happy childhood*, *getting by*, and *being like us*. The purpose of the categorisation is to position parents' reasons for school choices but not to label parents. Parents can employ several reasons from different quadrants at the same time. In reaching their decisions, 15 out of 40 parents in the study took into account some factors from each of these three quadrants: *an academic experience*, *a happy childhood*, and *getting by*. Nineteen parents considered reasons from two quadrants: These were mainly either a combination of *an academic experience* and *a happy childhood* or of *an academic experience* and *getting by*. Given consideration by 34 parents, the most frequently cited category of

reasons is *an academic experience*. Emphasised by only three parents, *being like us* was the least frequently cited category of reasons found in the study. In this section, we discuss how parents' actions in exercising school choice are steered by dynamic interactions between parents' individual agency, their wider socioeconomic constraints resulting from social structures, and the Voucher Scheme.

Previous research on the Hong Kong Voucher Scheme has claimed that the scheme represents a 'complete market approach' and leads to more 'commercialisation of services' (Yuen, 2007, p. 356), that it allows 'the market to work more freely' (Yuen, 2015, p. 168), that it signifies the formal recognition of parents' consumer powers in the education market (Ho, 2008), and that it is expected to operate a 'wholly private market' (Cheng, 2009, p. 362). Such research echoes a global trend Ball (2008) observed elsewhere. However, our study finds that the context of the Voucher Scheme in Hong Kong differs greatly from that of voucher plans in other countries, where the market elements of choice, diversity, competition, and demand-driven funding are brought to predominantly public school systems (Barrera-Osorio & Patrinos, 2009; Carnoy, 1998; Hepburn, 1999; McEwan & Carnoy, 2000; Neal, 2002; West, 1997).

In the twenty-first century, one can identify a particular discursive and generic international policy response, by nation states and national governments, which is 'permeating and re-orientating education systems in diverse social and political locations with very different histories' (Ball, 2008, p. 39). The result, in effect, is a 'generic global policy ensemble' founded on notions of 'marketisation, managerialism and performativity' (Ball, 2008, p. 39). The Voucher Scheme in Hong Kong, however, may be situated as an outlier within the wider notion of marketisation. Hong Kong governmental intervention through tighter regulations has, in the case of the Voucher Scheme, arguably reduced the degree of marketisation and moved the pre-primary education market from one more closely

resembling a free and private market towards a 'public-market' (Bagley, 2006; Woods and Bagley, 1996; Woods et al., 1998). The notion of *public-market*, coined by Woods and Bagley (1996), is designed for incorporating into its analysis state intervention, parental choice, school autonomy, and diversity of provision. The public-market is distinguished from the notion of the free market by the structural position and significance afforded to the public interest.

The Voucher Scheme segregates a single pre-primary education market with few regulations into a two-tier market structure, with one of the two segments becoming far more regulated and less diverse than it was before the introduction of the Voucher Scheme. The choice of English, Putonghua Chinese, or a non-local curriculum is no longer available to the voucher-eligible segment of the market. In essence, the voucher-eligible segment of the pre-primary education market assimilates the notion of a public-market and is much influenced by public elements such as government regulations. On the other hand, the non-voucher-eligible market segment remains one largely influenced more by private elements such as choice, diversity, completion, demand driven funding, and self-determination.

Hong Kong parents taking up vouchers are denied the opportunity to choose kindergartens on the basis of their language policies or curricula. These parents have to decide how important language policy and curriculum are to them and, if these factors are major determining ones, whether they can afford to opt out of the voucher scheme and pay the full fees of a non-voucher-eligible school. Interestingly, possibly due to the social and cultural contexts in which school choice research has been previously undertaken, the factor of language as a reason influencing choice has not previously featured in other research (Denessen et al., 2005; Kelly, 2007; Maddaus, 1990; Witte, 2000; Woods et al., 1998). However, language was identified, in previous research by Yuen and Grieshaber (2009), as being an important factor for consideration among kindergarten parents in Hong Kong.



The quantitative study undertaken by Li, Wong, and Wang (2010) referred to general improvements in both affordability and accessibility of kindergarten choices for parents in Hong Kong following the Voucher Scheme's introduction. Our study suggests that the Voucher Scheme's tuition fee subsidies increase some parents' ability to fund their children's schooling. On the other hand, reduced school autonomy and diversity of provision in one segment of a two-tier market may limit the choices of those parents possessing certain expectations for their children's educations. The resulting impact on the degree of parental choice is more intricate than is implied by the notion of general improvement in affordability and accessibility.

The Voucher Scheme's introduction arguably exerted a markedly different influence on the dynamic of school choice for low- and modest-income parents in the study as compared with for parents from wealthier socioeconomic backgrounds. In effect, the Voucher Scheme reduces, by the value of the voucher, the tuition fees payable by parents who choose voucher-eligible kindergartens. Subsequently, provided with the opportunity to offset or subsidise the fees that parents pay, more kindergartens have become affordable to parents with modest incomes. Furthermore, 12% of kindergartens in Hong Kong have, since the launch of the Voucher Scheme, converted from being private independent schools to being non-profit-making schools in order to gain voucher eligibility, and 84% of kindergartens were voucher eligible as of the 2009/10 school year (Education Commission, 2010, p. 18). In absolute as well as in relative terms, parents with low and modest incomes are now able to choose from a larger number of schools. As one parent stated,

Now, with voucher subsidising, we have more choices. (Parent, voucher-eligible school)

On the other hand, for the middle-class and high-income parents we interviewed, the introduction of the Voucher Scheme had seemingly relatively little impact upon their rationales or processes of kindergarten choice; the financial gains made from utilising a

voucher to select a voucher-eligible kindergarten were readily outweighed by other considerations and priorities. Most middle-class parents in the study chose voucher-eligible kindergartens not for the voucher but for other reasons pertaining to, for example, reputations of the respective kindergarten or prospects for desired primary schools. Such indifference towards vouchers was most evident amongst middle-class and high-income parents who desired kindergartens for their children in which the media of instruction were English and Putonghua Chinese – criteria for choice available only at non-voucher-eligible schools.

We found the school choice decisions of modest- and low-income parents whom we interviewed to be a *de facto* two-step process (Saporito & Lareau, 1999). With their initial choice decisions being based on tuition fees in the *getting by* category of reasons, these parents first ruled out kindergartens in which vouchers could not be redeemed. Having decided to confine their choices to voucher-eligible kindergartens, these parents then further reflected on their remaining options and on the kinds of kindergartens they would like their children to attend. On the whole, the study found that modest- and low-income parents were relatively likely to give most weight, in making their choices, to those reasons from the school choice approaches diagram's top and bottom left-hand-side quadrants (Figure 1) that focus on the present: All of the six parents who mentioned no reasons from future-focussed quadrants, on the right-hand side of the diagram (Figure 1), had modest or low incomes. Ball et al. (1995) interpreted this tendency as 'working class short termism', contrasting with the 'deferred gratification' associated with middle-class parents. Ball (2003) signalled the sophisticated ways in which, unlike their working class counterparts, middle-class parents make school choices based not simply on the present but also on their future aspirations for their children.

Middle-class ontologies are founded upon incompleteness; they are about becoming, about the developmental self, about making something for yourself, realizing yourself, realizing your potential. These parents envisage certain sorts of futures for their

children. They see themselves as having the responsibility to make these futures possible through their actions and planning in the here and now. (Ball, 2003, p. 163)

Moreover, a focus on the future in this way lends itself to an academic or school-based *orientation* rather than to choice factors concerning the family or to pastoral factors related to the school. The conceptual work of Woods et al. (1998) is helpful in focussing our findings around the school and family axis more concretely. Woods et al. (1998) have conceptually delineated their findings on school choice between two differing value perspectives held by parents: The *instrumental-academic perspective* focusses on outcomes, on achievement of academic qualifications, on measurability of performance through tests and examinations, and on academic features of school life. Alternatively, the *intrinsic-personal/social value perspective* is 'orientated around the child as a person: the capabilities, fears, ambitions, likes and dislikes, friendships, emotional nature, sensitivities, strengths and weaknesses of the growing person in their midst, and his or her friendship' (Woods et al., 1998, p. 171). While the research of Woods et al. (1998) did not find the instrumental-academic perspective to be generally social-class related, our data would suggest that there is a qualitative alignment of the low- and modest-income families in our study with kindergarten choices more strongly informed by the intrinsic-personal/social value perspective (Woods et al., 1998).

While parents' social positions are significant in influencing their school choices, their decisions are not determined solely by social conditions or by circumstances. Parents' reflexive deliberations are also important in shaping school choice decisions, as reflexivity enables parents to monitor themselves in relation to their circumstances rather than having their behaviours passively determined by circumstances (Archer, 2003; Elder-Vass, 2010). Our findings about differences in kindergarten choices, as signified in the school choice approaches diagram (Figure 1), are socially situated. At the same time, however, all parents interviewed were found to be reflexive and able and willing to undertake and exercise choice. All parents were found to care about their children's welfare within the constraints shaped by

their resources and to consider choice factors in various combinations from the school choice approaches diagram (Figure 1).

The properties of parents' emergent actions, that is school choices, are not reducible to the properties of the parts. 'Meaning is context-dependent' (Sayer, 2010, p. 60), and causal outcomes depend not only on causal mechanisms but also on the contextual conditions of these mechanisms (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Contextual conditions in which parents find themselves are important when explaining the school choice process and its outcomes. Therefore, for the purpose of analysis, we did not distinguish between voucher-eligible school parents as one group and non-voucher-eligible school parents as another group. In fact, we did not find from the data any overall tendency for common intra-group characteristics between voucher-eligible school parents or non-voucher-eligible school parents.

## **Conclusions**

Markets in education, like all markets, are not natural phenomena; nor do they operate in isolation. Rather, they are subject to political influences and operate within a politically determined legal framework (Hayek, 1976). Consequently, it is noteworthy how, on its introduction, the Hong Kong Voucher Scheme segregated a single pre-primary education market with few regulations into a two-tier market structure, with one of the two segments becoming far more regulated and less diverse than it was before the Voucher Scheme's introduction. Additionally, markets are socially conditioned and embedded (Etzioni, 1988). As Mingione (1991, p. 8) stated, 'market behaviour occurs according to rules that are set not by the market itself but by the socio-regulatory contexts'. The politico-legal and social characteristics of markets frame and inform and are in turn informed by the actions of individuals. In this two-tier pre-primary education market of Hong Kong's, a two-step school choice process now faces lower income parents for whom the tuition fee cost is an important consideration. This interactive process of structural and human agency affects the sorts of

complex outcomes which markets, including the education market informing the running and selection of kindergartens in Hong Kong, generate and which the findings from our study help in part to qualitatively illuminate. The interaction between parents' school choices and the outlying characteristics of the Hong Kong Voucher Scheme provides useful insights into the notion of marketisation and the debate surrounding education vouchers as well as contributing to the literature around school choice. As Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe (1995) acknowledge, 'there are a whole range of intricate variations in the operation of markets within and across nation states that reflect the struggles and negotiations people make as they live and work around and within "lived markets"'.

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Figure 1. School choice approaches.